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Performance-enhancing Supplements

Threat to athletes' wellness, safety

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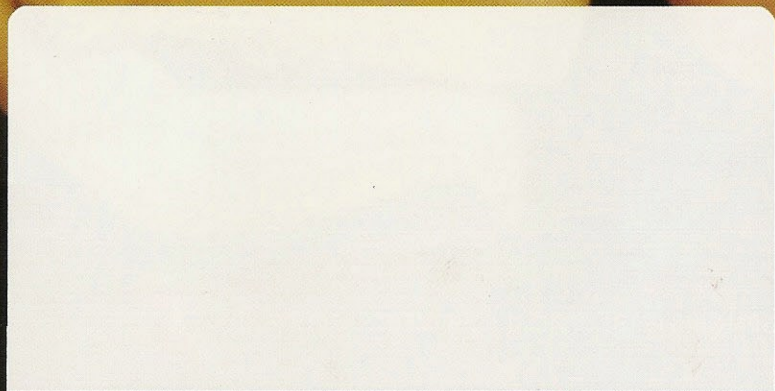
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Performance-enhancing Supplements – Threats to Wellness and Safety

BY CHRISTOPHER STANKOVICH, Ph.D.

Sadly, in today's sports world it is becoming commonplace to hear stories of athletes engaging in questionable, controversial – and sometimes illegal – efforts to improve on-field athletic performance.

While two substances (anabolic steroids and human growth hormone) have been closely scrutinized and had stiffer penalties put in place, there remain potentially hundreds of other performance-enhancing supplements. These substances are unregulated by the FDA and are legal to purchase and use, but the big question remains: While these products are legal, are they healthy and safe?

The fact of the matter is that the performance-enhancement industry is booming, yet few of these substances have been tested long enough to detect what future health problems they may cause. Additionally, stories about athletes enduring terrible physical consequences while using these “legal” supplements – sometimes even death – continue to make headlines across the country on a regular basis.

Since the performance-enhancement supplement business is probably not going to end anytime soon, what should coaches and others in leadership positions do when student-athletes begin to contemplate the options available to them to increase their speed, strength and endurance? The following is a list of tips, insights and strategies to help crystallize a high school athletic department's philosophy when it comes to performance-enhancing supplements:

- One concern about performance supplements has to do with the fact that they are legal, leaving many people to assume they are also safe. Keep in mind that cigarettes are legal, too, but most people acknowledge that they are hardly safe! Sadly, it may not be until many years from now that more data will be collected and we will finally know both the efficacy and safety of these supplements.
- Another concern is the mindset that “everybody is doing it,” which many student-athletes, coaches and even parents are

ascribing to these days (contributing to a casual, unconcerned attitude when it comes to the safety of supplements). This thinking is potentially very dangerous, and there is even greater concern about who is ultimately responsible for the actions of student-athletes today. Should the coach have policies in place? Should parents know exactly what is going into their child's body? Or should the student-athlete be responsible enough to know better? Unfortunately, this diffusion of responsibility often results in nobody doing anything!

- Perhaps the biggest problem with the use of performance-enhancing supplements by kids is that their bodies are still growing and developing, and without proper medical supervision the use of performance supplements may have serious risks. Furthermore, many kids have been known to “double up” their dosage when they see the impact a smaller amount has on their physical development. This is an extremely risky proposition, especially without medical oversight and guidance. Making things even more complicated is the fact that so many teenagers today are on various anti-depressant, anti-anxiety or Attention Deficit Disorder medications. Adding an untested performance supplement to this regimen is likely to further complicate safe physical and emotional development.
- Another big question is whether or not they actually “work.” Since the vast majority of kids begin to work out much harder once they begin using supplements, it is virtually impossible to discern whether the supplement is responsible for the change or, rather, the placebo effect is in play (this means that they believe the supplement is helping them, when in actuality it is really just their extra effort and motivation). For many kids, and even some coaches, when extra strength or speed is gained, the immediate assump-



tion is that the supplement is responsible for the change, rather than the extra hard work.

- Pay attention to the marketing of supplements and how attractive they are to your hungry audience of student-athletes. Who wouldn't want to get stronger and faster – and possibly do it in half the time? Supplement companies know this, and often the packaging and marketing hits a bulls-eye with fancy, bold packaging and athlete testimonials (paid, of course). Try to find ways to communicate with your student-athletes about these concerns so that they do not get caught up in all the hype and make an emotional, illogical and potentially unsafe decision.
- Administrators should encourage coaches to conduct a pre-season meeting with parents and student-athletes to discuss these issues and talk about their personal philosophy and team policies. Also, a physician or trainer might be able to provide the latest medical information about various supplements on the market. Schools should advise parents of these two things: 1) Parents are ultimately responsible for what their child is using to improve performance. They

should never assume the coach is aware of everything a student-athlete is doing. 2) If a child is using a supplement, with the approval of his or her parents, the minimum safety measure that should be taken is regular checkups with the family physician.

- Coaches and other school leaders should always emphasize the value of hard work. Schools must be clear and consistent about the value of hard work and determination – kids who hear this message are far less likely to use supplements.
- The coach and athletic director should communicate about policies that are in place for supplement usage. If there are none, discuss the potential of developing new policies to ensure kids are safe when competing in interscholastic sports.
- The coach must think of safety over winning at all times, including the potential negative impact of performance-enhancing supplements. Don't wait until the playoffs, when emotions are high and coaches are at more risk, to "look the other way" when it comes to issues around integrity. The coach and administrator must be on the same page because even the best coaches can be challenged when it comes to safety and good decision-making when their team is winning.

The reality is that performance-enhancing supplements are a very tricky subject to deal with for several reasons. First, supplements are legal, which makes it difficult, if not impossible, to prohibit them from being purchased (unlike anabolic steroids). Second, there is the question of responsibility: Should parents or coaches be held responsible for student-athletes choosing to use supplements? Often, each assumes the other is providing appropriate oversight, when, in fact, neither ends up paying close attention. And finally, without much empirical data to draw on at this time (since many supplements are very new on the market), it is impossible to truly know the potentially dangerous long-term side-effects of performance supplements.

Coaches must communicate with their athletic director and other school administrators and develop strategies to address the growing concerns about performance-enhancement usage by kids today. Additionally, communicate early and often with parents to ensure they are paying attention to what their kids may be doing to improve athletic performance. Finally, all school leaders must talk to the kids and emphasize the importance of hard work, determination and living a clean life – and how these qualities, not supplements, will enable them to reach their full athletic potential!

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